NOT BY BREAD ALONE
Luke 6:17-26
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The greatest temptation of all is not so much to engage in individual self-indulgence as it is actually to believe that doing what one wants and having what one wants will make one happy. The temptation is actually to believe that the more one consumes the better one feels: to appropriate as one's own an image of the world as supermarket, and the gift of life as one of those frantic, hell-bent-for-leather, races against the clock, up and down the aisles, grabbing all the goods one can before the time runs out. The temptation is actually to adopt as one's working hypothesis, the notion that the meaning of one's life may be calculated on the basis of what one accumulates over the course of seven or eight decades. And the tragedy of it is that in the middle of that we forget how truly to be happy.

I'm glad that it is acceptable and even fashionable for Protestants to observe Lent. It used to be that only the Romans observed the season, but happily we are recovering our common liturgical heritage and the seasons of the church year are back "in". Lent, someone wrote recently, is the shape of God's resolve to put things right. It is a moment in the year's time for acknowledging that the world is in a mess and that we share some responsibility for that. It is a season for honesty and repentance and responsibility: it has historically been the time when the church has stripped down to essentials to remind itself that the issues are always life and death. Lent is the time of year, someone said recently, for Christians to confess that they have been looking for their salvation in the wrong places: that they have not been noticeably effective in discovering happiness.

It begins this Wednesday and, appropriately enough, the lesson for the day is Luke's version of the Beatitudes, a more familiar version of which appears in Matthew, at the beginning of the sermon on the Mount.

William Barclay calls them Luke's bombshells, and they certainly are a more assertive, aggressive form of Matthew's mild blessings. Luke's beatitudes are human, earthy, real. Matthew says: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." In Luke it reads, "Blessed are you poor." Matthew's "hunger for righteousness" becomes a simple "hunger" in Luke. "Those who mourn shall be comforted" becomes, in Luke, "you that weep now for you shall laugh"... But most important, Luke adds a literary device which makes the entire sequence unavoidably sharp and uncomfortably painful - particularly if you happen to be, shall we say, comfortable - which means all of us. Almost as if to answer all the attempts to soften his statements by calling them metaphors, Luke adds a "woe" to each blessing. "Blessed are you poor, woe to you that are rich."

What is it that caused Jesus to take such a position? He did not condemn wealth nor reject people of property and means out of hand. Zacheus, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea were men of substance. Matthew was a tax collector, perhaps a wealthy man, which is why - cynical scholars

Sometimes bread is more than bread. Thus, the traditional Jewish prayer, even more ancient than the Celtic: "Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, King of the world, who bringest forth bread from the earth."

Sometimes bread is more than bread. Sometimes, most times, it is quintessentially the food we need to live. Let me tell you more about bread than you probably wished to know. It's production has consumed most of the attention of most of the people who ever lived. Bread represents civilization. Wandering, nomadic people don't eat much bread. Manna in the wilderness is a great, life-giving miracle, because you don't have the capacity to produce bread if you're on the road the better part of forty years. Anthropologically speaking, the manna the children of Israel ate in the wilderness was a lab exercise in the kind of life they could lead in the promised land if they promised to settle down and plow some fields instead of wandering around the desert, living in tents. Bread means civilization.

There were bakers in wealthy households in the ancient world and they were good at their art: they experimented with ingredients, baking methods, shapes and sizes. But for the vast majority of households in the ancient world, baking bread was what you did, most of the day, every day, day in and day out, as long as you lived.

The dough was made from wheat flour and water, supplemented by whatever other cereal meal was available. In Canaan the people learned to crumble and knead a piece of yesterday's bread to provide leavening. Baking could be as simple as a heated rock and the flat round cake covered with hot ashes, or as sophisticated as a kind of convection oven made of an inverted earthen jar. The loaf was ordinarily an 18 inch disk, like a small pizza. Three per day - was the basic diet. One of its major functions, from the beginning, was to convey other food into the mouth, an edible utensil, a practice we have all seen our youngsters try on occasion.

Even in antiquity bread is celebrated for its power as a symbol. The Old Testament employs a variety of images - the bread of idleness, bread of deceit, bread of tears, breads of adversity. And then, one time, one of them drew all of that meaning together and gave the world something it has never yet been able to stop pondering. Jesus said: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger."

He had fed a large crowd of people with a few loaves of bread and a few fish. The next day part of that same crowd had followed him. They became uncomfortable when he wondered out loud about their motives. For their part, they revealed those motives clearly and impatiently by saying: "What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness. He gave them bread from heaven." Translate that: "How about some more of that bread, Jesus?" And he said, "...the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." And they said, "Lord, give us this bread always." and he said, "I am the bread of life."

It is not accurate to conclude from this that Jesus didn't care about bread which is bread. After all, he had provided a substantial meal the day before. And I believe, only someone who knows about and loves the look and smell and touch and feel and taste of good bread, has the ability to use it as a metaphor for something else. My guess is that the one who called himself the bread of life, knew and loved and was something of an expert on that less august bread which fills the air with its bouquet, and the sight of which is an insistent reminder fo the needs of the flesh which, on measure, are among the creator's better ideas.

The truth is that we need one another to be human and to be happy. The book everyone is talking about is John Naisbitt's Megatrends, and in a fascinating chapter titled "High Tech - High Touch", the author writes: "We must learn to balance the material wonders of technology with the spiritual demands of our human nature." (p. 40) Naisbitt is not a sociologist, or psychologist or minister. He is a social forcaster and his clients are AT&T, GE, and IBM. He describes how electronic data processing can now make us very self-sufficient. Happily esconsed in our electronic cottages we will soon be able to do our banking, shopping, communicating and entertaining at the console of our Apple Home Computer. But, says Naisbitt, we are encountering something called "High-Tech Backlash" and public resistance for instance to automatic and electronic accounting. "Some of us want to go to a teller. In fact, some of us want to go to the same teller each time." (p. 44) Teleconferencing and computer shopping are logical and independence producing high tech trends which aren't working because people like to be together. "The more technology we introduce into society, the more people will aggregate, will want to be with other people: movies, rock concerts, shopping, shopping malls, for example are now the third most frequented space in our lives, following home and work place." Naisbitt concludes his chapter on technology with a sentence which could, with a little polishing, become a commentary on our text: "By discovering our potential as human beings we.....develop the inner knowledge, the wisdom, perhaps, to guide our exploration of technology." (p. 53)

Apparently the goal of self-sufficiency and independence is not as noble as we think. In fact, perhaps - as Luke suggests - it is contrary to our humanity which is our happiness. In a book of essays, theologian Dorothee Soelle, writes about the danger of death by bread alone....."To live by bread alone is to die a slow and dreadful death in which all human relationships are mutilated and strangled. Our bodies still function. We stil lgo about the chores and routines of life. We come andd go and speak. Yet we do not really live."

I suppose we have all known or know someone who spent a life time being totally self-sufficient, and now, in later years, lives in a hell of isolation and alienation. The author catches the near demonic nature of the experience....."Death by bread alone means being alone and then wanting to be left alone; being friendless, yet distrusting and despising others; forgetting others and being forgotten; neither laughing nor being laughed at; neither crying for another nor being cried for by another. How horrible it is - this death by bread alone." (p. 3/4)

The Lenten text suggests that humanness, life, blessedness, happiness are a product of interdependence and that the opposite of all of that is our obsession with self-sufficiency. When it translates into global politics the stakes get much higher, of course.

As a nation, we still enjoy the thought of self-sufficiency and independence and recall with great fondness the day when we approached that blessed state. The popularity of Winds of War I think is at least in part because in 1945 the United States had emerged as a truly self-

I would submit that "sweet bread from the starry heaven" - "bread of life" - points to the single most compelling need with which you and I must cope. We are not, that is to say, idly playing with the piety and poetry of antiquity. We are now dealing with the top item on the agenda of every single one of us. In the terms of our own lives we are now talking about the profound need of every person for something more than survival, for some meaning, some personal significance. We are now talking about the universal and personal need to know that one matters, counts for something, that one's life adds up to something.

In the introduction to the book everybody has read, is reading, or will soon read, In Search of Excellence, the authors quote psychologist Ernest Becker, "Society ...is a vehicle for earthy heroism. Man transcends death by finding meaning for his life. It is the burning desire of the creature to count...What man really fears is not so much extinction, but extinction without significance." The authors of the best seller conclude that one of the formulas for success in business is a corporation which answers that deep, theological need. (Peters and Waterman, In Search of Excellence, xxiii)

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life" and the inference is that there was a hunger in those people which would not be satisfied by manna from heaven, and that there is a hunger in us that is not satisfied by food: that there is a security and a freedom not bestowed by full barns - and there is a thanksgiving which gathers up the bounty of creation and goes beyond to confront the creator.

How simple life would be if only it were not so. How simple if human need began and ended with enough bread to eat and a place to sleep. And then it comes to us that the hunger itself is of God: that Augustine was gloriously and wonderfully right in the prayer that goes: "Thou hast made us restless until we find our rest in thee." Speaking at a University Convocation at Chicago Professor Joseph Sittler told the academic community that one of the burdens of scholarly integrity was to live a lifetime of probing, doubting, questioning that which seems to be pinned down. It is to indulge and even to cultivate the spiritual and intellectual hunger for the whole, eternal, illusive truth. To all who sometimes weary of the search - tire of being perpetually hungry - Sittler spoke eloquently, "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst without being filled...For just to hunger and thirst, and to know without settling for it, that you do hunger and thirst, is given a kind of negative benediction. Hunger, unabated, is a kind of testimony to the reality of food. To want to have may become a strange kind of having."

"Give us this bread always" the crowd said to Jesus, not knowing what it was really asking, I suppose. We know. We ask for what we need - ultimately. We ask for bread of life: for meaning; now and then for some sense that I am intended by God, I am loved by God, I am saved by God. What we ask from life is something upon which to conclude that I am more than a biological coincidence; that I am accepted and loved and graced by that which is greater than I.

Bread of life - translate that - the love of God the creator. Without it, life has no taste, bread is only bread. With it, regardless of circumstance; in season and out of season, in sickness and health, on the rocky shore of the new world, or around a laden Thursday table, in prison, hospital ward, nursing home, in church, living room, board room, with God's love - we are not only safe and free and gloriously alive - we continue to discover that the best religious idea we can come up with is always gratitude.

If only prayer is "thank you" not be

To know God is to be grateful

Happy are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Happy are you when you forget about yourself for a minute and live entirely for others. Happy are you when you purchase a gift and give it away and enjoy the delight and surprise in the person to whom you give it far more than you would in receiving a gift. How happy to be a giver of gifts. How happy it is when the ones you love are happy. How blessed, not when you have everything, but when your elderly parents are content and your children are happy and your loved ones are laughing. How happy to lose your sense of self in the act of giving to another only to realize that in giving and living for others you are the best self you ever will be. "Blessed are you poor..." The happiness promised by the beatitudes is internal. It is like listening to one of the majestic Bach concertos and being so drawn into the mysterious intricacy of the music that you realize simultaneously your own smallness, your poverty, your own poor humanity in the presence of the music's magnificence. It's like the sheer joy of being in the presence of great art which is implicitly to be made smaller and more human by the greatness of the art.

We don't live by bread alone, nor by anything we eat, or own or use. We live by grace: by gift: and a happy thing it is to realize it. Blessedness, the New Testament calls it: the happiness to be found in the discovery of our true self the moment we forget about self: the richness to be discovered in acknowledging one's poverty: the life which is given in the act of losing it: the gifts which are received in the very act of giving.

So Lent, and the reenactment of the old but always surprising drama: the story of a Lord who embodied God's love: a Lord who died loving, that we might somehow catch on and learn to live. Amen.